

The Washington Times

Natural gas extraction training opens up well-paying jobs

Sunday, October 16, 2011

By Julie Carr Smyth – Associated Press

ZANESVILLE, Ohio — Shuttered businesses and boarded-up houses dot the streets of historic Zanesville, the struggling river city where Cory May is starting a life with his young wife.

Until recently, job prospects in his native eastern Ohio were grim even for a hard-working Marine reservist willing to work hard or relocate. Mr. May's mother works as a school custodian in Cambridge, his nearby hometown. His machinist dad is among the county's 11 percent unemployed. Most of his better-situated friends are in the military or work at one of the area's remaining factories.

"It's either that or working minimum wage for the rest of your life, and let's be honest, who really wants to do that?" said Mr. May, a sturdy 23-year-old who did a tour each in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The natural gas industry has changed his prospects.

Vast stores of natural gas in the Marcellus and Utica shales running under Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York and West Virginia have set off a rush to grab leases and secure permits to drill using the extraction technique called hydraulic fracturing, or fracking.

Mr. May snapped up the opportunity through his local community college, Zane State, to take a two-week, 80-hour shale exploration certification course developed by the private company Retrain America. When he graduated, he has interviewed for three jobs and taken a position cementing wells for Halliburton that will pay \$60,000 to \$70,000 a year.

Zane State is among dozens of public colleges and universities across the northeastern shale states that are moving to add staff, academic majors or job-training courses in fields related to natural gas.

Through a three-year, \$4.9 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor, for example, five community colleges in Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and New York formed a coalition called ShaleNET. It is focused on recruiting, training and placing people in high-priority natural gas occupations.

"There's really been a sea change in these opportunities, a cornucopia of community colleges and local workforce training programs across the commonwealth of Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio, even the southern tier of New York," said Travis Windle, a spokesman for the Marcellus Shale Coalition,

representing energy and exploration companies. “As natural gas continues to expand, so do the needs for a local workforce with these skills that are going to be in need for the next 50 years, or even more.”

Training shale workers is not only on the minds of energy interests in the Northeast; newly available resources in Colorado, Oklahoma, Wyoming and Texas also have been met with new educational offerings. Those include the Colorado Energy Research Institute’s outreach efforts with a dozen community and technical colleges, and the professional land management certificate program started just last month by the University of Texas at Austin. The field’s promised job growth is being documented.

However, Chuck Wyrostock, outreach organizer for the Sierra Club of West Virginia’s natural gas campaign, said the economic benefits of the shale boom could be short-lived.

“There is some danger in young people getting trained in the area, when maybe five or 10 years from now other factors will keep them from taking advantage of it any further,” he said. He said jobs in alternative energy may overtake the shale gas as America is weaned off fossil fuels.

The Penn State study anticipated that shale-related jobs would be available for 30 to 50 years, but that many workers would have to migrate over time, following the drilling rigs as they move from place to place. Many of the early jobs in Pennsylvania have been landed by out-of-state professionals, especially from energy-rich Texas, and that has concerned labor groups.

For now, Mr. May is basking in the boom times. He’s still floored that he got the opportunity right at home to catch such a wave.

“It blew my mind, really. I was like what? It’s coming here?” Mr. May said. “It’s kind of unheard of, really.”